

“Stop Teen Dating Violence, Prevent Even Worse Outcomes Later”

by US Attorney Anne M. Tompkins

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President Obama has recognized February as “National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month.” The President has called upon Americans to “stand against dating violence when we see it.” The proclamation is both a reminder and a call to action. It’s a reminder that 1 in 10 teens will experience some form of violence by the person they are dating. It’s a call to action to stand against violence and speak up when we think it’s happening.

Whether it’s physical, psychological, sexual, emotional or verbal, teen dating violence cuts across lines of age, gender, race, religion and socioeconomic status. The experience of the violence is real and the impact of that abuse is both immediate and long-term. One in five women and one in seven men who have experienced some form of violence by an intimate partner first experience it between ages 11 and 17. The exposure to violence at a young age and the trauma it causes creates a cycle of victimization and abuse that often persists later in life.

We want to believe that our children are dating young men and women who love and cherish them as much as we do and that in their relationships they experience acceptance and respect. The reality is that many teens and young adults find themselves in unhealthy and often abusive relationships that profoundly impact the quality of their lives. And, as technology advances and our means of communication change, so does the form of dating violence. Young victims of cyber stalking, text messaging harassment, and cyber bullying experience loss of self-esteem, self-respect and victimization that can have devastating long-term effects.

Most of the teens and young adults in abusive relationships do not “report” the violence they experience. They are reluctant to talk about it to their friends and families because they do not want to expose their partner or do not recognize the abusive relationship for what it is: abusive. They see the abuse as “love” and the obsession as “caring.”

As professionals, parents, educators, leaders and community members it is important to do our part to end teen dating violence, by talking openly about dating violence and paying close attention to indicators that a teen is in an abusive relationship. Some of the signs are falling or failing grades, mood/personality changes, depression, isolation, physical abuse, and loss of self-esteem. It is equally important to look out for indicators that a teen’s dating partner is abusive. Is the partner excessively jealous or controlling? Verbally abusive or threatens violence? Demands constant attention? Wants to isolate the partner from friends/family? These are some possible indicators of unhealthy teen dating relationships.

It is important to reach out to teens and young adults and teach them how to navigate romantic relationships, how to communicate their feelings in healthy ways, and how to handle emotional situations in a non-aggressive manner.

The Department of Justice recognizes that exposure to teen dating violence in the formative years puts victims and aggressors at higher risk of victimization and perpetration in adulthood. Looking out, speaking up and taking action can help reduce teen dating violence. Intervention and prevention are key elements to stopping the cycle of violence so today's adolescent victim is not tomorrow's domestic abuse fatality and today's abuse perpetrator is not tomorrow's criminal defendant.